

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you

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“. . . and They did not Repent”

The Biblical Doctrine of Human Depravity
by Bob DeWaay

“The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons, and the idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk; and they did not repent of their murders nor of their sorceries nor of their immorality nor of their thefts.” (Revelation 9:20,21)

“Men were scorched with fierce heat; and they blasphemed the name of God who has the power over these plagues, and they did not repent so as to give Him glory.” (Revelation 16:9)

Last year my wife and I participated in a home Bible study that studied the book of Revelation. We had just contemplated the portion of end time judgement that will involve the horrors of the plague of demonic scorpions and locusts that will be released upon the earth. People will be so tormented that, “. . . men will seek death and will not find it; they will long to die, and death flees from them” (Revelation 9:6). After five months of torment by the scorpion like visitors from hell, a third of mankind will be wiped out by a plague of fire, smoke and brimstone (Revelation 9:18). Then the tragic and ironic words of Revelation 9:21 “. . . and they did not repent,” hit me with shocking force. Surely these plagues which will dwarf anything previously experienced by mankind will cause those who survive to repent and turn to God! “. . . and they did not repent!”

Even then, the rebellious human race will go back to business as usual, ignoring God and rejecting His Messiah. Nothing changes. History will continue to prove the Biblical doctrine of the complete sinfulness of mankind right up to the end. Nothing but the intervening, supernatural grace of God will ever cause a sinner to repent.

Let us consider why people made such choices and what should be the proper response.

Lessons from History

What will happen in end times judgment has roots in history, e.g. Sodom and Gomorrah. When Lot entertained the angels the wicked men of the city demanded that the angels given to them for perverse purposes (Genesis 19:4-6). Their lust was so great they tried to break down Lot’s door. The Scripture says, “They [the angels] struck the men who were at the doorway of the house with blindness, both small and great, so that they wearied themselves trying to find the doorway” (Genesis 19:11). One would think that having been struck blind would cause them to question what they were doing and consider God’s displeasure with their actions. Yet so driven were they that even blind they wore themselves out trying to find the door — they did not repent. Later they were judged with fire after Lot and family departed the city.

Consider what Peter said about Sodom and Gomorrah: “and . . . He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly lives thereafter” (2Peter 2:6). God has not changed His attitude about homosexuality nor any other transgression of His moral law. The judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah serves as a timely example of God’s attitude to-

ward this behavior, having removed any excuses people may offer. God did not say He would in every case burn such cities with fire, nor strike people blind. Having done so in this one case and having included the event in the Biblical record, all people thereafter now clearly know God’s will. They should know that they face the judgement of God.

Judgements such as these are called **exemplary** judgements. Many confuse these with God’s ultimate system of justice which will culminate in the great white throne judgement (Revelation 20:11). This confusion causes them to wonder why so many people seem to be getting away with things like those upon which judgement fell in the Bible. Some wrongly assume that God has changed His ways and attitudes, especially since the first advent of Messiah and the new covenant. Peter told us that He has not.

Have people gotten the message? — not everyone has. Many in the so-called “church” do not take exemplary judgement seriously. A publication of the Minnesota Council of Churches says, “It is ironic that the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is used repeatedly to condemn gay and lesbian people. Whatever else may be said for the account, it is a story which condemns inhospitality to the strangers in our midst. While it has not always been so, the church has been incredibly inhospitable to gay men and lesbians . . .”¹ The problem according to those of this religious ilk, is that people who take the Bible seriously believe that homosexuality is a sin and thus are guilty of being inhospitable to those who choose to live this way. By twisting scripture they make Bible believing Christians out to be the true Sodomites. Obviously, inhospitality was not the key problem in Sodom. Saying so is like saying of an armed bank robber, that his offense was the failure to say “please” and “thank you.”

The problem with rejecting exemplary judgement is that when we do we remain in bondage to the base drives of fallen human nature. We cannot be

delivered from sin unless we admit that we need forgiveness and deliverance. God could allow us to do what we want throughout life on this earth. Then we would have only eternal judgement to face and no hope of escape. Us human beings are incredibly sinful and totally unable to save ourselves. We can only hope for the supernatural intervention of God.

Understanding Human Depravity

Many balk at the doctrine of sin as presented in the Bible because they feel that it presents too negative of a picture of humanity. The reformers spoke of “total depravity” which does not mean that every human is just as sinful as is possible, but that all of humanity and the whole of each individual is affected by sin. After the fall, Adam and all of his descendants were plunged into the darkness of being alienated from God. All people are born with a sin nature, and sinfulness affects all aspects of our humanness; but clearly there are degrees of human sinfulness.

For example, it is incorrect to say that the body is fallen and sinful but that the mind is not. It is likewise in error to teach as some have that the material world and the material part of man is fallen but that what is “spirit” is pure and unsullied by sin. The whole person, body, soul and spirit is fallen and sinful, needing salvation. Thus Paul writes of the need for sanctification, “*Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1Thessalonians 5:23). Paul also admonishes, “*Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God*” (2Corinthians 7:1).

Since the whole person is affected by sin, the whole person needs salvation. Total depravity means that no one can save himself. The mind is sinful, so it refuses to believe God and His Word despite clear evidence of His existence and truthfulness (Romans 1:18-21).

The will is effected so that we cannot overcome sin simply by choice — left to ourselves we are neither willing nor able to stop sinning. “*The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so and those who are in the flesh cannot please God*” (Romans 8:7,8). Here, Paul means by “flesh,” all that a person is, in himself, separated from God. Outside of God’s grace our affections are also sinful and given over to all manner of things besides loving God. This is what total depravity means.

Jesus’ disciples realized the difficulties that face us and asked, “*Who can be saved?*” (Matthew 19:25). Matthew records the answer: “*And looking at them Jesus said to them, ‘With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible’*” (vs 26). It is important to understand the depth of our horrible sin problem. Sinfulness causes sinners to assess the problem too lightly and look for man-made solutions. This is a problem. Proudful humanity will first try anything less than acknowledging bondage to sin and crying out to God for grace, mercy and forgiveness. As soon as the consequences of sinful actions start to fade, sinners forget that there was a problem. As soon as the hang-over starts to wear off the drunk forgets and the bottle looks pretty good again. So it is with other sins.

This is illustrated throughout history, Biblical and otherwise. Pharaoh quickly went back to his stubborn defiance as soon as a plague relented. Hitler never let the sting of defeat deter him from launching a new offensive, even if ill-advised. No one dared tell him the truth, it would cost them their lives; and so it is with sin. Nothing infuriates a committed sinner more than being told the truth. “*Men were scorched with fierce heat; and they blasphemed the name of God who has the power over these plagues, and they did not repent so as to give Him glory*” (Revelation 16:9). They got angry and sinned more even though it was clear that God was who He claimed to be and they needed to turn

to Him. These people knew it was God and they still would not repent.

Stephen, having been accused of blasphemous words against God and Moses (Acts 6:11), recounted the gracious intervention of God in the life of Israel and suggested that those who had brought forth false witnesses were resisting God as some others had in the past. The result: “*But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul*” (Acts 7:57,58). Stephen’s defense was a brilliant description of well-known Biblical history. The truth created anger and cost him his life.

Human depravity causes sinners to reject God’s gracious offer of salvation through His Messiah. God’s grace softens the heart and causes us to grieve over our sin and cry out to Him for salvation. Enough evidence already exists to make the whole human race accountable before God for judgement (Acts 17:31, and Romans 3:19). Persistence in unbelief is caused by tainted, hardened hearts — not lack of evidence.

The Universality of Sin

Paul uses the first three chapters of Romans to establish the fact that sin is a universal, human condition. The creation shows all people the reality of God’s attributes, but they have chosen to ignore the evidence (Romans 1:25). The Jews have the law and specific revelation and yet sinned while under the law. The Gentiles without the Law sinned against their own consciences (see Romans 2:12-15). Paul concludes: “*What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, ‘there is none righteous, not even one’*” (Romans 3:9,10). He then strings together a series of Old Testament citations to show that sin has affected all people and all aspects of each person’s being (Romans 3:11-

18).

The picture is exceedingly bleak and hopeless. It is so bad that no individual human effort can fix it, nor will the collective efforts of the world system. Glimpses of hope cause people to think that things can change. Individuals can certainly better themselves. People have quit certain destructive behaviors and managed to become productive citizens through their own efforts and the help of others. Some people are quite kind, humanitarian, and do manage to make to world a little nicer place in which to live. But none of this constitutes a solution to the sin problem. The result of sin is death, a problem humans cannot solve. Being better than we were or better than some other individuals does not make us free from sin.

The enigma of humanness is explained by the Biblical doctrines of Creation followed by the Fall. Being created in God's image explains the potential that is seen in human history. Great things have been accomplished, including things that genuinely benefit many people. Yet the over-riding theme has been hope and potential dashed on the rocks of war, crime, and cruelty. Sometimes remarkable good and evil have been accomplished by the same individual, baffling the behavioral scientists. The Biblical doctrines of Creation and the Fall explain the evidence better than any human theory. As bearers of the image of God (**Genesis 9:6, James 3:9**), people have the ability to do noble things; but in their alienation from God and sinfulness they misuse their abilities.

None of this is a surprise to a student of the Bible. It is exactly as the Bible says it has been and will be until God Himself brings an end to history. Even the noble people of the Bible, the heroes of faith, are portrayed as those who failed and needed God's grace. David is a typical example. He loved God but also failed miserably. Only Jesus, the sinless Son of God, lived a perfect life. The bleak and horribly bad news of universal sin serves as a dark background to contrast the glorious Good News of the gospel. After elo-

quently describing the bleakness of universal human sinfulness in Romans, Paul turns to salvation by faith, apart from works of the Law (**Romans 3:21-30**). God sent Jesus to die for our sins, as a substitutionary sacrifice, ". . . so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (**Romans 3:26b**). God passes over the sins of the person of faith because of the shed blood (laid down life) of Jesus Christ.

Sin and Legal Justification

Imputation is a theological word that describes the relationship that all sinners have to Adam's sin and that all believers have to Christ's righteousness. Paul makes use of the term and the twin concepts of being sinners in Adam and saints in Christ in Romans and 1 Corinthians.

Many have stumbled over this aspect of the Biblical doctrines of sin and justification. Imputation begins with the sinfulness of the whole human race in Adam. **Romans 5:12-14** says,

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come.

The idea of Federal Headship (that a whole race can be involved in the actions of its progenitor) as it has been called, was common to Jewish thinking. For example, the writer of Hebrews used this idea to prove the superiority of Jesus to the Levitical priesthood. The proof was that Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek. Levi was the descendent of Abraham and thus could be said to have "paid tithes" (see **Hebrews 7:8-10**). Jesus was of the order of Melchizedek and therefore superior to Levi.

What this has to do with Adam and

sin is that the Bible considers all humans to be "in Adam." Consider **1 Corinthians 15:22**, "*For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.*" Adam stood as the father and legal representative of the entire human race. When he sinned, we sinned. This sin is legal and actual. We are born sinners legally, in Adam, and actually because we are alienated from the life of God, lacking the indwelling Holy Spirit. We are both accounted sinners and practicing sinners. This sounds hopeless, and it would be if not for the mercy and power of God.

In **Romans 5**, Paul contrasts the depravity and death that came upon the human race because of Adam with the eternal life that comes to those who are in Christ by God's grace: "*So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous*" (**Romans 5:18,19**). If, as many have argued, it is not fair that we became sinners in Adam, then they must also object that we who have faith in Christ are made righteous in Christ. Clearly Paul's point is that we die in Adam and are made alive in Christ. Death is the penalty for sin. People died during the intervening years between Adam and Moses, though the Law had not yet been given and those who died had not personally eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They died because they were sinners like Adam, law or no law.

Justification in Christ means that God reckons Christ's righteousness as ours, if we have faith in Christ. Paul is not teaching universalism (that all are automatically saved). All are "in Adam" by nature, but we can only be "in Christ" by faith. Nowhere does the Bible teach that unrepentant sinners are, "in Christ." We are made righteous by Christ's "obedience" of taking our sins upon Himself on the cross. His righteousness is a gift that is received by faith.

Even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.

(Romans 3:22-24)

Notice that this righteousness is “for all who believe,” not for all who exist. It is a gift of grace brought about by the work of God in Christ. This is what we mean by legal justification.

From the time of the Council of Trent until now, Roman Catholic teachers have scoffed at this idea as “legal fiction.” They claim that God can never declare a person just who is not actually just. Since sin still taints human behavior even after believing on Christ, they suppose that a person cannot really be sure of salvation. In their system of belief, the whole process of penance, confession, and other works designed to supplement the merits of Christ still does not result in assurance of justification. Hence, the necessity of an imagined “purgatory.” Clearly **Romans 3:24** which describes “being justified as a gift” is at odds with the Roman system that withholds the assurance of salvation from its one billion adherents. Justification by faith is not “legal fiction,” it is the supernatural work of a merciful, Almighty God. Cannot God as the rightful Judge of all the Earth satisfy His own demands for justice by sending Messiah to die in our place? Surely He has.

God’s Solution for Sin

God’s solution to the sin problem transcends all human efforts at self-help. Sinful man does not even want to repent. The passages cited from the Book of Revelation prove that. Plagues and misery do not invoke repentance any more than good times and prosperity. When things go well, the unregenerate do not think they need God and when things go badly they curse and blaspheme God. God’s solution is radical. Sinners must die. Death is at the same time the just penalty for sin and the solution. “*What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?*” (**Romans 6:1,2**).

Paul answers his own rhetorical question — we do not continue in sin

because we have died to sin. Christ’s death is our death. Baptism symbolizes our death with Christ and resurrection into newness of life (**Romans 6:3-5**). We who have believed the gospel and fully trusted Christ for our salvation have agreed that we are dead to our old, sinful way of life. We live by faith in Christ. Our motive and purpose for life is forever radically different. We live for Christ unto eternal life rather than for self in present spiritual death while facing future eternal death. We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God and therefore have spiritual life. We are new creatures (**2Corinthians 5:17**).

People have debated whether anyone can do anything about salvation, since salvation is a gift. Technically, the answer is “no,” we cannot save ourselves. Yet the Bible tells us what we **must do**, “repent and believe the gospel” (**Mark 1:14,15**). We are to command sinners everywhere to repent. God uses the agency of the message preached to save the lost (**Romans 10:8,9** describe what must happen to be saved). However, unaided by God’s grace, sinners scoff at the gospel and like many who have gone before “. . . they do [did] not repent.” If we do believe the gospel and repent, we have not added to the merits of Christ nor performed a “work of the law” that earned our salvation. God has given us a gift, totally unearned and undeserved.

How this works out behind the scenes is the arena of theological debate that has people divided into various camps. Personally, I am satisfied with the Biblical explanation — we were chosen by God. The theme of God’s choice of individuals is found from Genesis to Revelation (see **Genesis 12:1-3** for God’s choice of Abraham and **Revelation 17:14** for God’s people as the “chosen”); but the idea that we chose God creates the false notion of human merit. Yet this truth cannot be used to blunt the urgency of warnings to repent, to avoid apostasy, to flee God’s wrath, etc. We must take every “if . . . then” contingency with all seriousness and cry out to God for mercy and grace. I love the explanation Daniel Fuller gave at a pastor’s conference. He said, “the unregenerate read the warnings in the Book of Hebrews about the danger of apostasy [leaving the faith] and say ‘I don’t have to worry, I am eternally secure.’ The elect read those same warnings and the hellishness is scared out of them — the warnings cause them to repent.”

Heeding the Warnings

The best advice is given in the Book of Hebrews, through a quotation of **Psalms 95:7,8**. The writer of Hebrews gives the following admonition:

But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, while it is said, “Today if you hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked Me.” (**Hebrews 3:13-15**)

If I may paraphrase the idea — if you have any inkling in your heart to repent, do so now before sin so hardens you that you never respond. The people who will refuse to repent even after five months of torment by scorpions and witnessing the judgment of a third of the earth’s population will have become so hardened by the deceitfulness of sin that nothing can make them repent. We face that same danger and only the grace of God can deliver us. Today, “if you hear His voice” — **respond in faith!**

Do not think that things might get better by waiting. The worst case scenario is that they will — that is they will **seem** to get better. I once was asked to visit the dying father of a Christian lady. She told me that he had spent nearly all of the years since World War II slowly drinking himself to death. He was now in the Veterans Hospital, having nearly succeeded in killing himself with alcohol. I went to his bedside and shared the gospel. He responded, “I know about that, my daughter has spoken to me many times. However, I am doing better today and might get out of here.” He did not want to repent that day, in case he recovered and got to go home to drink some more! That illustrates the **deceitfulness** of sin.

Sin deceives sinners into thinking things are better than they are. Even when the consequences weigh heavily upon them, sinners hope for a “better day” when they can sin and not die. The gradual and inevitable effect of the process is “hardening.” They might become so hardened that even the sting of demonized scorpions would not get them to quit. If you hear God’s voice (the inner call of the gospel) you have your opportunity to repent. Today is the day of salvation. Tomorrow will only bring a harder, more calloused, cavalier heart that won-

ders why one ever worried about such things as an eternal soul facing judgment. “. . . *and they did not repent.*” Dear Lord, by your grace may that not apply to us as we consider your words.

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1. Minnesota Council of Churches,
“Oikoumene, Statement on Ministry to
and with Gay and Lesbian Persons”
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www.twincityfellowship.com/cic